

TILL AND KEEP AND GOD'S INDWELLING*

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes to restore the understanding of Genesis 1-2 not as an innocent prelude for the Fall, but as the blueprint for the unfolding of God's plan for the created world. In this context, the idea that humankind was given the image of God is articulated with the instructions given by God in paradise: naming the animals (Gn 2:19), tilling and keeping the soil (Gn 2:15), multiplying, and filling and mastering the Earth (Gn 1:28). Such tasks would have the function of guiding the human development towards the likeness of God, while contributing at the same time to Earth's development, according to the model furnished by the garden of Eden, arguably meant to be extended and multiplied. The final objective of such efforts would be to prepare the Earth for God's indwelling. The Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1–13), along with the Parable of the Faithful Servant (Matthew 24:42–51; Mark 13:34–37; Luke 12:35–48) could be said to warrant such interpretation.

Keywords

Genesis; Creation; Image of God; Earth; Garden of Eden

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In this article, I propose to understand the instructions given to humankind in the book of Genesis – naming the animals (Gn 2:19), tilling and keeping the soil (Gn 2:15), multiplying, and filling and mastering the earth (Gn 1:28) – as a commentary on how the idea of *imago Dei* should be understood and put in practice. I will argue, moreover, that the

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Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1–13), along with the Parable of the Faithful Servant (Matthew 24:42–51; Mark 13:34–37; Luke 12:35–48), can be understood as a commentary on the human mandate to till and keep the earth under God’s supervision but with a good degree of autonomy. Finally, I will try to show how tilling and keeping can be articulated with eschatological hopes.

1. Till and Keep

Irenaeus conceived Adam and Eve as children created to grow into the likeness of God.¹ Other theologians saw things differently. Robert South, in the 17th century, conceived Adam coming ‘into the world a philosopher, (...) he could see essences in themselves, (...) consequents yet dormant in their principles, and effects yet unborn in their causes; his understanding could almost pierce into future contingents’.² Others held that Adam had not necessarily a more developed intellect but better organs of sensation. Joseph Glanvill, for example, also in the 17th century, argued that, in Adam, ‘even the senses, the Soul’s windows, were without any spot or opacity’, allowing thereby a deeper apprehension of reality, perhaps to the point of making reasoning unnecessary. Peter Harrison notes that some theologians, in the same period, even thought that ‘the knowledge of the first man was born with him’.³ Adam, in this perspective, would have arrived in the world already fully informed about where he was and how he was to live.

That said, if Adam was created perfect, why was he, along with Eve, so easily led to mistake? Simply following logic, we seem forced to conclude that Adam had, at best, the potential for perfection but not perfection in actuality. That is the reasoning proposed by Irenaeus in ‘Against Heresies’. He claims that Adam, just created, was still unable to receive the highest gifts from God. Had he received such gifts, he could not contain them. Containing them, he would fatally let them scape.⁴ Adam is compared to a baby, for a period able to eat nothing but milk. In Irenaeus’ reasoning, God would act in relation to the human being as a mother in relation to her infant:

¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book IV, chapter 38.

² Apud Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), 211.

³ Harrison, *The Bible*, 212.

⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book IV, chapter 38.

For as it certainly is in the power of a mother to give strong food to her infant, [but she does not do so], as the child is not yet able to receive more substantial nourishment; so also it was possible for God Himself to have made man perfect from the first, but man could not receive this [perfection], being as yet an infant.⁵

Such perspective helps to understand the tasks presented before Adam and Eve in paradise: naming the animals (Gn 2:19) and tilling and keeping the soil (Gn 2:15), in articulation with the exhortation to multiply and fill and master the earth (Gn 1:28). Such tasks were given to introduce Adam and Eve, as representatives of the human species, into a process of development. By knowing the garden (naming), conserving (keeping) and developing it (tilling), Adam and Eve were to gradually move towards higher levels first, of humanisation, and later, it can be supposed, of deification, as they became ready, step by step, to receive greater gifts from God.

Human development, in this context, should not be seen as an isolated phenomenon within creation. Developing themselves by fulfilling the tasks they were given, Adam and Eve were expected to simultaneously develop the earth, making it adequate for human habitation, with due consideration for the interests of other species, also blessed and commanded to be fertile (Gn 1:22) – and initially, it should be recalled, not intended to serve human dietary needs (Gn 1:29). Eden, in this sense, was a prototype. Once Irenaeus' fundamental insight regarding human development is accepted, it becomes clear that Eden was not just a pleasant place. Paradise had a function, which apparently was that of showing to Adam and Eve how the earth was meant to be. Eden was a model, to be extended and multiplied, as Adam, Eve and their descendants fulfilled the exhortation to fill and master the earth – an idea well understood but often terribly misapplied by the protestant sects that, in the 17th century, saw as their mission to make of the entire world a garden through the colonial expansion of agriculture and other 'arts of civilisation'.⁶ Treating work not as a punishment but as divinely-ordained activity, Christians influenced by the reformation well captured the gist of the first two chapters of Genesis, interpreting

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Harrison, *The Bible*, 239. See also Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 90–91, 125–141.

them not as an innocent prelude for the Fall, but as the blueprint for the unfolding of God's plan for the earth – an idea still worth being explored. Isaiah 45:18 could be said to furnish the main interpretative key for this reading of Genesis:

For thus said the LORD,
The Creator of heaven who alone is God,
Who formed the earth and made it,
Who alone established it–
He did not create it a waste,
But formed it for habitation:
I am the LORD, and there is none else⁷

Irenaeus illustrates the long and complex process of human development *within* and *with* creation by proposing to understand in a dynamic sense the idea that humans were given the image and likeness of God. The image of God would refer to a potentiality, while the *likeness* to the actualisation of this potentiality.

To better understand this perspective, it is useful to note that the words till (עבד) and keep (שמר), central in the context of God's educational strategy, can be interpreted both in very practical and also in more clearly spiritual terms. In Hebrew, the word עבד – normally translated, in Genesis 2, as 'till' or 'cultivate' – means, more generally, both to work and to serve and can be found not only in the context of economic discussions but also in the context of religious declarations. The word is used, for example, when Jacob discusses with Laban how long he would work to acquire the right to marry Rachel. To serve, in this context, means to *work under someone's orders*, in pragmatic terms, and does not necessarily imply a sincere commitment. The same word, however, is also used, for example, in the commandment '*serve the LORD your God with all your heart and soul*' in Deuteronomy. Serve, therefore, can mean simply to work or, more seriously, to pay

⁷ The word 'waste' here is a translation of תהו (Jewish Publishing Society, 1985), also used in Gn 1:2 to describe the initial state of the Earth (והאֶרֶץ הָיְתָה תהו וְבֹהוּ) before God created the light and separated light from darkness. Isaiah 45:18 can probably be seen as a commentary on Genesis 1. The fundamental idea here is that 'Yahweh characteristically intends not only to have a world, but to have a certain kind of world, one that generously and gladly attends to the goodness and extravagance of life.' Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1997), 158. This theme will be further developed in the fifth section of this article.

allegiance to someone or to some cause. The famous distinction between alienated and non-alienated labour is perhaps useful at this point. It could be suggested that work was not meant to allow or invite such distinction, as work arguably should follow from a 'natural' disposition towards making the world fully inhabitable in a spontaneous and joyful partnership with the Creator. The emergence of inequality and oppression, in the social arena, along with the birth of fear and ambition, in the psychological domain, however, made possible, not to say necessary, the distinction between the fuller and the impoverished sense of עבד (serve/work).

As for שמר, it can have practical applications, such as in Gn 3:24, when angels are placed to the east of Eden in order to 'protect' – in a literal sense, at least in narrative terms – the way that leads to the tree of life, but is more commonly found in the Bible in texts dealing with obedience to God's commandments, such as in 'observe' the Shabbat or 'keep' my covenant. The word can also be found in Gn 4:9, where Cain asks: 'Am I my brother's *keeper*?' Here the word gets perhaps to its most complete set of connotations, although by negation, as it involves, since God's expectations are being addressed, not only protecting, but also nurturing in a spirit of love, friendship, and respect.

Taking into account the different occurrences and connotations of עבד and שמר, Joshua Moritz suggests that 'till and keep' are not entirely adequate translations. In his view, the first humans were created to be 'priests' of creation and not actually to work. Work would enter into the picture later 'as an ironic reversal of man's original purpose'.⁸ Originally, '[m]an's life in the garden was to be characterized by worship [as a translation of עבד] and obedience [as a translation of שמר]'⁹ – 'he [the first man] was a priest, not merely a worker and keeper of the garden.'¹⁰

In opposition to this 'pro-clerical' interpretation, which inadvertently seeks to inscribe 'alienation' into the structure of creation, by separating, in the life of the human being, essence from existence, to the detriment of the latter, I suggest that by keeping both levels of meaning, not only the spiritual but also the practical, in relation to עבד and שמר,

⁸ Joshua Moritz, 'Evolution, the End of Human Uniqueness, and the Election of the Imago Dei,' *Theology and Science* 9, no.3 (2011): 307–339. For the issues mentioned above, see pages 326 and 338.

⁹ Moritz, 'Evolution,' 326.

¹⁰ John Sailhamer, quoted in Moritz, 'Evolution,' 326.

we can better describe the process that God apparently had in mind when He created the human being not yet perfect. Humans are supposed to grow up and develop, and there is not only a spiritual aspect to this but also a material one. To properly articulate both levels, according to the Chalcedonian model, is the challenge faced by a theologically informed anthropology.

2. *Imago Dei*

Before going further, it is important to examine in more detail how the idea of *imago Dei* appears in the Bible. The first mention of the concept is found in Genesis 1:26–27. There is presented the idea that the human being was made in the image of God and after his likeness, with the implication, made explicit in the text, that human beings are thus entitled to ‘rule over’ animals, domestic or wild, either inhabiting the sea, the skies or moving over the earth.

The idea is reiterated in Genesis 5:1, in a preface to the list of Adam’s descendants: ‘This is the record of Adam’s line. When God created man, He made him in the likeness of God.’ Shortly after, in Genesis 5:3, it is said that ‘when Adam had lived 130 years, he begot a son in his likeness after his image, and named him Seth’. It is debatable whether the reference to Adam’s image and likeness at this point should be seen as replacing the reference to the likeness of God mentioned before, as if Seth had the image and likeness of his father and not the likeness of God. In my view, it seems that the second reference to image and likeness reinforces the first instead of replacing it.

It will be recalled that, as a result of the Fall, God cursed the soil, making the production of food more toilsome (Gn 3:17–18). Since Adam and Eve were not cursed, there is no reason to believe that the *imago* was lost with the expulsion from paradise. However, as there could be a doubt, Genesis 5:1 confirms that Adam was made in the likeness of God and does not add to this any disclaimer. Adam and Eve left Eden carrying the image of God, not as a man carries something of value in a bag, but as a mother carries a baby. The repetition of this theme in relation to Seth seems to confirm, again in a reassuring way, that although conceived by natural means and not by divine intervention, he inherited the basic qualities given to his father by God.

The situation of Cain after his banishment is different. In that, he was given a ‘mark’ (Gn 4:15), not in order to be discriminated, but so

that he would not be killed outside Eden, which is perhaps an indication that the image of God, although preserved regardless of the Fall, can be obscured to the point of making the human being unrecognisable and perhaps easily mistaken for something like a wild animal. Cain's reasoning seems to invite such an interpretation. Informed of his punishment, he affirms: 'Since You have banished me this day from the soil, and I must avoid Your presence and become a restless wanderer on earth—anyone who meets me may kill me!' (Gn 4:14). The mark he was given in response to this argument arguably had the function of making explicit a hidden quality: Cain's humanity. At the same time, the mark obviously pointed to the existence of a problem, thereby functioning both as a sign of inclusion and exclusion.

The ambiguity of Cain's situation, protected by God but banished from His presence, can also be seen in the subsequent events in his history (Gn 4: 16–17): Cain retained the capacity to have offspring and later built a city. The association of Cain with the emergence of urban life should not be taken as casual information. The editor of Genesis apparently sought to contrast God's creation of a garden with Cain's creation of a city, a point well observed by Abraham Cowley in the 17th century: 'God the first garden made, and the first city Cain.'¹¹ Cain's retention of the image of God helps explain these developments. The Biblical narrative seems to suggest that Cain was the first who managed to develop the *imago* not towards the likeness of God but towards something else. Able and active but separated from God, Cain should perhaps be considered the patriarch of all attempts to build a purely human world using the God-given human capacity to rule over creation. In this sense, it is very plausible to think of the outcome of Cain's history as a commentary on the process of secularisation, taken as a possibility inscribed in the structure of creation beyond its systematical occurrence at different places and moments.

A further development in the history of *imago Dei* within the Bible can be found in Genesis 9:6. There it is said, when a new social contract is presented at the ending of the Flood: 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, By man shall his blood be shed; For in His image Did God make man.' The *imago*, at this point, is presented as surviving not the expulsion from paradise but the Flood, as if the doubt in relation to the character of the human being had again – and with good

¹¹ Harrison, *The Bible*, 236.

reason – resurfaced. At the same time, the establishment of capital punishment shows that the solution found for Cain was now considered insufficient. In the post-diluvian world, murder was thought to erase from its author the image of God instead of making it socially invisible or obscured. Killing as a response to killing therefore became possible.

To focus on the good side of this regression in criminal law, if the *imago* can be lost on occasion, it is a sign that it was certainly preserved, in accordance with the biblical narrative, as a general rule. In fact, in the blessing to Noah (Gn 9:1–7), some of the main lines of the creation account are reiterated, and a fundamental role for the human being is again clearly stated. In Genesis 9:1, as in Genesis 9:7, that is, in the opening and in the closing statements of the reordering of the world after the Flood, the words of Genesis 1:28 can again be heard: ‘Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth.’

In fact, the post-diluvian social contract accords the human being even greater powers. While before it was said that the human being would rule over or subdue other species – notions that leave room for ‘constructive’ interpretations, now it is said, in clearly harsh and instrumental terms, that ‘the fear and the dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky (...) and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hand. Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these.’ (Gn 9:2)

This is the moment in which the human being was given the right to treat animals as food. This is the moment, as well, in which, by human initiative, animals began to be used in sacrifices (Gn 8:20).¹² Not by

¹² See, on this regard, Didier Luciani, *Les animaux dans la Bible*, Cahiers Évangile, no. 183 (Paris: Cerf, 2018), 25: ‘Noé force la main à Dieu et, en quelque sorte, l’implique dans sa violence, en offrant un sacrifice que celui-ci n’avait jamais demandé, mais qu’il aurait été, de sa part, discourtois de refuser.’ Luciani suggests that, after the Flood, God – ‘lucide’ – decided to accept, apparently in order to regulate it, [la] ‘réalité de la violence’. God, at least at this point, would support, in other words, a ‘realist’ anthropology. Gn 4:4 could be said to inaugurate animal sacrifice in the Bible. Abel, however, arguably made to God an offer of milk, along with a living animal, the first to be born in his flock or the first of a given female sheep. There is no reason to believe that Abel offered God a dead animal as a gift. There is no mention in the account of an altar for sacrifice, for example. Given the interdiction of animal consumption in Gn 1:29–30, it seems very unlikely that animal sacrifice was somehow demanded or authorised by God still in Eden, even more in an implicit and unregulated way. Abel, therefore, probably gave God a living lamb along with a bottle of milk in order to share with the creator, in gratitude, the results of his work. The word *חלב*, used in Gn 4:4, is inconsistently translated throughout the Old Testament, sometimes as milk, sometimes as fat. The

chance, when the account of the new creation ends, God does not proclaim it good or very good. Paradoxically, the new alliance formed at the end of the Flood is said to include 'all flesh' (Gn 9:17), that is, not only humans but all living beings. This might be one of those cases in which an editor is thought to have intervened in the original text, making it incoherent, in the hope of softening a message considered too harsh.¹³

We should be careful, however, not to introduce supersessionism already in Genesis and should try, above all, to respect the text as it stands. What Genesis 1–11 apparently seeks to demonstrate is that, although 'very good', the world created by God – and left to the 'tilling and keeping' of a divine-like but very problematic gardener – is fragile; 'very good', but easily vulnerable to disfiguration; not fallen, but ambiguous.

That said, two fundamental 'theological facts' presented in Genesis should be fully taken into account: a) God almost regretted creating the world; b) when recreated, the world was not fully restored; it was saved but changed. That Noah and his descendants, after the Flood, became meat eaters (Gn 9:2) and animal sacrificers (Gn 8:20)¹⁴ in contrast with their vegetarian (Gn 1:29), animal-naming ancestors (Gn 2:20) and that

word appears, for example, in Exodus 33:3 where it is normally translated as milk: 'a land flowing with milk and honey' (ארץ זבת חלב ודבש). If the idea of 'a land flowing with milk' sounds natural in a vision of paradise restored, it should sound even more natural in a description of Eden. A land flowing with fat and honey would certainly be a very strange one! Cain, charged with tilling the soil, also wanted to share with God the results of his work. In fact, Abel and Cain together, one tilling the soil, the other working as a shepherd, were apparently meant to illustrate the main variants of the human vocation on earth, understood as a response to the exhortation to till and keep. The editor of Genesis, however, apparently chose to change the focus of the story at this point, leaving behind the debate about tilling and keeping and bringing into the scene the troubles of human relationships, as if concluding that the main obstacle for proper tilling and keeping lies not in the human relationship with nature but in relationships among humans. A very thoughtful comment on this topic, by Kathy Dunn, can be found in: 'Shepherding All God's Creatures', accessed December 12, 2022, <https://www.all-creatures.org/articles/an-tpr-beginning-cain-abel.html>. Referring to Gn 4:4, she asks, for example: 'I wonder how this passage would read had we known nothing of the sacrificial system.'

¹³ On this topic, see John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), especially the chapter 5, on Ecclesiastes, whose 'original version' is often thought to have been supplemented in order to attenuate a message considered too pessimist and sceptical. According to the 'supplementary hypothesis', notes Barton, 'the original Qoheleth was a work of considerable though not wholly unacceptable skepticism, which had been touched up in places to bring it back within the orthodox fold by the addition of such verses as the conclusion' (p. 63).

¹⁴ On animal sacrifice, see note 14 above.

violence among humans became widespread to the point of apparently requiring the establishment of the death penalty are signs that the world that was meant to be ‘very good’ and in which God could rest (Gn 2:2), actually became a gloomy and dangerous place, even if yet full of vestiges of former glory, almost demanding full reconstruction.

It is in such a world – a world in which God would have no place to lay his head on (Luke 9:58; Matthew 8:20) – that the history of salvation begins with Abraham’s calling.

3. Election

After this brief biblical examination, we can go on to consider some of the implications of the *imago Dei* doctrine. The first main implication concerns the human entitlement to ‘rule over’ other species while fulfilling the exhortation to fill the earth. The second main implication concerns the regulation of social life. This double implication should be strongly emphasised. Ecological criticism has made it easy to discard *imago Dei* as a dangerous anthropocentric invention. Without ignoring the damage caused by claims of human superiority, it is important to recall that the *imago* also provides the basis for the notion of human dignity and consequently for the establishment of fundamental human rights, such as the right to life, although, as seen above, not without some ambiguity. The *imago Dei*, in other words, is a package which needs to be interpreted as it is. Picking and choosing from the biblical text whatever might seem more appropriate at different times and in different places in accordance with often volatile ideological preferences creates the risk of breaking carefully constructed arrangements within the biblical text.

That said, even those interested in preserving the *imago Dei* doctrine should admit that there is not much in the scriptures favouring a very high view of humankind. Even though humans are said to bear the image of God and potentially or in actuality His likenesses, what we see throughout the Bible is not very encouraging. First, there is the Fall; then there is Cain. A few generations later, we are told that God ‘regretted that He had made man on earth’, since ‘every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time’ (Gn 6:5). The Flood, along with the new covenant, could be expected, as discussed, to mark a new beginning, but we are soon told the story of Babel (Gn 11:1-9), in which human ingenuity is equated with hubris. Afterwards, in

despite of many signs of progress in the history of salvation – the liberation from bondage in Egypt, above all – we find in the Deuteronomy not only unsettling transgressions but also disturbing attempts at correction of condemned behaviour. Death by stoning, for example, is mentioned as appropriate punishment more than a few times.

In other words, while it is true that by the concession of God's image and likeness humankind was given, according to Genesis, singular rights over the whole of creation along with singular potentialities, we should be careful not to conclude from this that the Bible furnishes a clear foundation for claims of human superiority. At best, the Bible presents the human being as ambiguous – capable of correction, sometimes righteous, often heroic, but always prone to mistake. To mention only one example, of all people, Aaron was the one putting together a golden calf (Ex 32:4). It is not surprising, therefore, that on a few occasions, *non-human* creation is actually presented in the Bible as superior to human creation, at least in the sense of being able to recognise God's glory, as when Jesus says, in Luke 19:40, that were his disciples not to praise him as God's anointed, 'the stones would cry out', likely not only in God's praise but also in protest against human blindness.¹⁵

This theme, although from a different starting point, was developed persuasively by Joshua Moritz. Taking into account the lack of scientific support for the claims of human superiority, he argues that the *imago Dei* doctrine can only be maintained if understood as 'election'. The *imago*, in this sense, would not be related to any qualities, physical, mental, or moral, that the human being could be said to possess. It would follow exclusively from God's sovereign will. The *imago*, therefore, should not be read through the lens of 'salvation through works'. In the same way, the *imago* should not be seen through the lens of 'salvation through faith', as if only religious or righteous people would have the image of God. The *imago* should not be seen as an achievement or a reward but as a gift and a calling.

To explain his view on the election, Moritz takes as a model the choice of Israel by God to carry out His 'salvation project', noting that 'those who are elected are not chosen because they are "the greatest" or

¹⁵ On this topic, see David Horrell and Dominic Coad, "'The Stones Would Cry Out'" (Luke 19:40): A Lukan Contribution to a Hermeneutics of Creation's Praise,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64, no. 1 (Feb. 2011): 29–44.

inherently more worthy than others, but rather as a result of mysterious acts of divine love and grace.’¹⁶ Elected people – or people convinced of their own election – can probably actually improve in many aspects, in so far as the election often introduces the elected into a process of betterment. We could recall in this context a phrase attributed to Napoleon: ‘a man becomes his uniform’. That said, one should be careful not to invert the proper relation of causality. God does not necessarily choose the best, but those chosen are certainly expected to become better. When Jesus said ‘out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham’ (Luke 3:8; Matthew 3:9), he was praising not stones but God in an attempt to remind his audience that the election should not be transformed into a motive for self-indulgence. This is confirmed by what Jesus immediately adds: ‘The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire’ (Matthew 13:10; Luke 3:9).

In the Hebrew Bible, therefore, as well as in the New Testament on a different scale, the election is presented as a mission in the context of the history of salvation to which God calls potentially everyone but concretely, for mysterious reasons, specific individuals and groups, demanding from the chosen ones nothing but full conversion and dedication to God’s project under penalty of destruction, as stated most emblematically in Deuteronomy: ‘I set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity’ (30:15); ‘I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse’ (30:19). Therefore, if the image of God in the human being should be understood in terms of election, we should almost fear it in addition to taking it as a badge of honour.

In Moritz’s words,

election in the Biblical understanding relates to a people whom God has chosen in the midst of history for a special purpose within the wider context of God’s design. This purpose of election is (...) defined not in terms of privilege, but rather for the sake of service.¹⁷

Trying to connect God’s project for Israel and God’s project for the broader world, Moritz argues that one aspect of service is ‘to represent

¹⁶ Moritz, ‘Evolution,’ 321.

¹⁷ Ibid.

God to “the many”.¹⁸ He recalls, in this context, Genesis 12:3, in which it is said that through Abraham all the families of the earth would be blessed. He explains that ‘the many’ for Israel ‘are the gentile nations to whom Israel as God’s elect is to bear God’s light and justice’.¹⁹

To say, however, that the elected should strive to help the non-elected is certainly not going far enough, in so far as a fundamental distinction among humans is thereby preserved, while God’s freedom to choose different partners to carry out his salvation project is not fully acknowledged. The way forward is shown in two passages of the Hebrew Bible, persuasively analysed by Walter Brueggemann, in which Israel’s monopolistic claims over God are broken. The first is Amos 9:7:

Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,
O people of Israel? says the Lord.
Did I not bring Israel from the land of Egypt,
and the Philistines from Caphtor
and the Arabians from Kir?

The second passage can be found in Isaiah 19:23–25:

On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will serve with the Assyrians. On that day Israel will be the third party with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people and Assyria the work of my hands and Israel my heritage.’

In the first passage, Israel remains fully under God’s protection and guidance, but God’s attention is made available as well for other peoples. In the second passage, the broadening of God’s purview is made more explicit. The last verse, notes Brueggemann,

takes up three special names for Israel that are rooted in its peculiar and privileged relationship with Yahweh: ‘my people’, ‘the work of my hands’ and ‘my heritage’. These three names, all heretofore assigned exclusively to Israel, are now distributed across the Fertile Crescent, assigned to people

¹⁸ Ibid., 322.

¹⁹ Ibid.

who have been a great threat to Israel and a great vexation to Yahweh. In this daring utterance we witness the process by which other peoples are redesignated to be Yahweh's chosen peoples so that, taken paradigmatically, all peoples become Yahweh's chosen peoples.²⁰

Although with some ambiguity, Moritz embraces this perspective, arguing that Israel arrived at the conception of *imago Dei* as well as the concept of divine election through the 'democratization of ancient Near Eastern royal ideology'.²¹ He notes that the idea of the image of God, coupled with the idea of divine election, was originally applied in Egypt or Assyria to individual authorities or entire dynasties in order to justify the exercise of power. Against this background, the application of the *imago Dei* concept to the entire humankind was an extremely bold movement, which in many ways actually created the human being, at least as currently understood: as universally endowed with inherent dignity and rights.

The conception of election applied to the people of Israel might seem, in comparison, less revolutionary. To understand the different ways in which *imago* and election were democratised, it seems necessary to introduce history in the debate. The *imago*, as presented in Genesis, was apparently conceived in order to transcend history, that is, in order to protect the fundamental status of the human being from fluctuations in power and politics.²² Election, on the other hand, was made to stand right in the middle of history. This point is well presented by Moritz. He notes that 'in the Biblical concept of election it is clear that YHWH's electing is not contained in some divine decree that exists beyond time (...) but rather takes shape in the historical activity

²⁰ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 522.

²¹ Moritz, 'Evolution,' 329. See also Konrad Schmid, *A Historical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2018), 431–432 and also p. 219: 'Gen 1 transfers the 'image of God' – traditionally the prerogative of the kings – to all humanity. Not the king, but rather the kingly person is a reality of creation.'

²² Brueggemann notes that Genesis 1:1–2:4a was likely composed in the period of the Babylonian exile. Presenting God as 'serenely and supremely in charge', able to create simply by the power of his word, the text offered to displaced and oppressed Israel a 'contrast-world', creating space for the irruption of hope and courage in despite of dire circumstances. See *Theology of the Old Testament*, 153 and also 533 ('counter experience of creation'). The interpretation of the *imago* presented above is convergent with this idea.

of divine redemption that is grounded in the history of YHWH with his people.²³

The election was perhaps strategically contained to a single people at a given point in time and space in order to be made fully operational. In so far as election demands service, it apparently requires organised effort and, therefore, some degree of cohesion and direction, which might be easier to achieve within a single people. That said, to make of biblical Israel a model of cohesion and direction would be going too far, and although it might be a good exercise to speculate about God's preferences, it is foolish to suppose one can fully understand God's decision-making process. What seems clear is that election is very likely open-ended, 'rather than [being] a matter of exclusivism and particularity'.²⁴ It has, therefore, 'an inclusive and universalistic tendency'²⁵ – an inclination that does not exclude, it should be emphasised, possible occasional concentrations at certain historical junctures.

4. The Horizon of Creation

Moritz delves into questions that are beyond the reach of this article. Here, I propose to retain his understanding of *imago* as election while refusing, for example, the idea that humans, fulfilling the function of 'priests of creation', should act to 'elevate' animals towards higher metaphysical levels, in analogy with the way Israel is expected to guide other peoples towards God.²⁶ I agree with the idea that, on occasion, the human being can, in Eucharistic fashion, 'reconcile and harmonize the noetic and the material realms, to bring them to unity, to spiritualize the material, and to render manifest all the latent capacities of the created order',²⁷ as proposed, for example, by Kallistos Ware. But to make of this the human role in creation, it is, in my view, to go in a dangerous direction. There are many situations in which human actions

²³ Moritz, 'Evolution,' 321.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 322.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 324–325: 'Both the Old Testament authors and those of intertestamental Judaism develop a picture of Israel as God's true humanity, "aligning with Adam, and the Gentiles with the beasts over whom Adam rules"; "According to the Genesis narrative, the nations in relation to Israel parallel the animals whom Adam is called to both serve and rule"; "as Israel holds a place of honor among the races, so humans occupy a place of honor among the animals"; "as the nations are structurally equated with the animals, "the High priest ruling over Israel is like Adam ruling over all creation".'

²⁷ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2018), 70.

are able to reveal extraordinary latent capacities in creation, such as when pieces of wood are transformed into a musical instrument or when wheat is transformed into bread. However, there are also innumerable questionable or clearly harmful transformations. The human being, therefore, should not look at the created world as a deposit of raw material waiting for ‘reconciliation’ with the spiritual world or development in simple empirical terms. As argued by Richard Bauckham, there are many cases in which humans are likely to better fulfil their regal *imago Dei* role by just letting creation be. ‘All creatures’, he argues, ‘bring glory to God simply by being themselves and fulfilling their God-given roles in God’s creation.’²⁸ They lack nothing, in other words, and have no need for human mediation in order to reach God. That said, the recognition of the fundamental goodness of creation does not preclude careful and balanced development within the limits assigned to the human being (Gn 11:6). Against excessive ambition, it seems important to remind that likeness and identity are not the same thing and that the king’s representative, however important, should not be mistaken for the king – one of the lessons of the Book of Esther. God’s reply to Job – in the Anthropocene, more than ever – remains valid: ‘Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations?’ (Job 38:4).

The commandment to till and keep might help, once again, to elucidate what is the proper human role within creation. Till and keep can be read as a single commandment, in the sense that one instruction requires the other. It might be a reminder, in the most literal sense, that it is not enough to sow seeds; it is necessary to ensure plant development through nurturing and protection. Ibn Ezra, with commendable concreteness, interpreted ‘keep it’ in the context of Gn 2:15 as ‘to guard the garden so that no animals enter therein and befoul it’.²⁹ That said, it is normally possible, regarding the Biblical text, to conciliate concrete and specific interpretations with much broader ones. In this sense, till and keep might also be read as pointing to different but articulated ways to look at and deal with creation. *Till* opens creation for development, while *keep* suggests a conservative attitude. The combination of perspectives results in a balanced approach, which could be summarised in the following commandments: bring forward hidden

²⁸ Richard Bauckham, ‘Joining Creation’s Praise of God,’ *Ecotheology* 7 (2002): 45–59, 47.

²⁹ *Ibn Ezra’s Commentary on the Pentateuch*, translated and annotated by H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver (New York: Menorah Pub., 1988–2004), available at: <https://www.sefaria.org>.

potential, but do not force creation to go beyond its natural inclinations; develop creation to improve it, not to disfigure it. Till and keep, understood as guiding principles for human action, can be read as a call for action and, at the same time, as a warning against hubris.

Such interpretation should not be read as interdicting a fuller Eucharistic expectation. The day will come in which God will dwell in creation (Revelation 21:3), taking incarnation to its fullest possible extent. Men and women are certainly expected to be ready for this day, as illustrated by the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25: 1–13), as well as by the Parable of the Faithful Servant (Matthew 24:42–51; Mark 13:34–37; Luke 12:35–48). Both parables can be interpreted as illustrating the need to endure in hope, a fundamental teaching which, however, can be misread as favouring a passive attitude. Two other parables can help to understand more clearly what being ready implies: the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30; Luke 19:11–27) and the parable of the barren fig tree (Luke 13:6–9). Both can be interpreted as a direct comment on the exhortation to till and keep, with a strong emphasis on the productive side of the equation. Connecting Genesis and the Book of Revelation, I propose to understand the need for results which these parables illustrate as pointing to the obligation to prepare the earth, through tilling and keeping, for God's indwelling, that is, for the eternal Sabbath.

At this point, an important caveat is necessary. If the garden of Eden can be considered a prototype for the development of creation, there is no doubt that there is a strong ecological aspect in the process of preparation of the earth for God's indwelling. That said, taking care of the part of creation each person is given does not necessarily need to be interpreted solely in ecological terms. A people can be given land, parents are given children, teachers are given students, an authority is given a role in public life, a doctor is given patients. All given something to till and keep might at any moment be visited by the Lord. Creation, therefore, should not be identified with nature exclusively or understood in opposition to civilisation. As observed by Walter Brueggemann, 'Yahweh characteristically intends not only to have a world, but to have a certain kind of world, one that generously and gladly attends to the goodness and extravagance of life.'⁵⁰ Such goodness and extravagance require and encompass all creatures. We might call this

⁵⁰ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 158. Also quoted above, see footnote no. 9.

ecology, but with the risk of transforming the beating heart of the Bible into just another branch of theology.

Creation was meant to offer all creatures a homely environment, as Psalm 104 beautifully illustrates, with references not only to human interests but also to the needs of animals and plants:

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,
giving drink to every wild animal;
the wild asses quench their thirst.
By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;
they sing among the branches.
From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.
You cause the grass to grow for the cattle
and plants for people to cultivate,
to bring forth food from the earth
and wine to gladden the human heart,
oil to make the face shine
and bread to strengthen the human heart.
The trees of the field are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
In them the birds build their nests;
the stork has its home in the fir trees.
The high mountains are for the wild goats;
the rocks are a refuge for the coney.
You have made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows its time for setting.
You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.
When the sun rises, they withdraw
and lie down in their dens.
People go out to their work
and to their labor until the evening. (Ps 104: 10–23)

In this Psalm, we see humans treated almost just as another species, daily receiving God's gifts and using them to build their lives: bringing

forth food from the earth, making bread for sustenance, wine for joy, and even oil apparently to be used as cosmetics. The quotidian, down to its smallest aspects, is treated as a clear sign of the continuous presence of the Lord. God's attentive care encompasses all creation, with humans and other creatures living side by side. There is hardly any space in this perspective for the understanding of humans as 'priests of creation'. What Psalm 104 – 'the fullest and most extensive Israelite witness to creation'⁵¹ – shows is humans modestly going out to work and doing their labour until the evening.

Is that modest role compatible with the idea that humans should work to prepare the earth for God's indwelling? To answer this question, it might be necessary to recall that ordinariness is very often misleading. Psalm 104 describes a rich and varied world where there is space for a multitude of species thriving under God's protection. Humankind contributes to such exuberance by knowing its place and respecting the space of other species. *Imago Dei*, in this context, can be seen in the capacity to make room for others, as well as in the fulfilment of the daily duties that keep the world going around. Is that enough to make the world the dwelling place of the living God?

5. Incarnation

As already observed, the role of humankind is to be ready. Being ready includes enduring in hope (Matthew 25: 1–13; Matthew 24:42–51; Mark 13:34–37; Luke 12:35–48) and 'investing' God's gifts in order to increase the amount of goodness in the world (Matthew 25:14–30; Luke 19:11–27; Luke 13:6–9). It can be hoped that God will accept the fruits of human labour as a pleasant offer, which God himself perhaps might be happy to personally receive, thereby entering, to some extent, into the domain of creation.⁵² God, in such perspective, can be seen at least as a visitor, able to get in and out of creation without ceasing to be

⁵¹ Ibid., 530.

⁵² Here an analogy could be proposed with Pope Francis' understanding of prayer: 'When we pray courageously, the Lord gives us the grace, but He also gives us Himself in the grace: the Holy Spirit, that is, Himself! The Lord never gives or sends a grace by mail: never! He brings it Himself! What we ask for is a little bit like... it is the envelope that grace is wrapped in. But the true grace is Him, Who comes to bring it to me. It's Him. Our prayer, if it is courageous, receives what it asks for, but also that which is more important: the Lord.' (Pope's message at the morning Mass at Casa Santa Marta, October 10, 2013).

transcendent, as shown, for example, in Gn 18:1–15, when Abraham receives God as a guest.

Going further, it would be possible to take the Priestly doctrine of divine presence in the temple as a model for God's hope for a permanent presence in the entire creation. In that case, the earth would have to be treated as a temple, not only in the sense of being preserved 'as created' but also in the sense of being prepared and adorned for God's indwelling. Although the idea of treating creation as a temple involves the risk of subjecting the understanding of God's indwelling here to the criticism traditionally applied to cultic practices – according to which cultic activity might be seen as 'primitive, magical, manipulative',⁵³ the Priestly concern with 'order, symmetry, coherence, and dignity – all of which bespeak a certain beauty'⁵⁴ – can certainly guide, in general terms, human endeavours if such endeavours are to be thought as able to contribute to the coming of God – a 'demanding agent, whose presence', at least according to the Priestly view, 'is not trivial, incidental, or ad hoc'.⁵⁵

Whatever the case might be, no attempt at mediating God's presence would suffice were it not for God's willingness to join creation, the topic of the concluding remarks of this article.

Simon Oliver suggests that 'the universe was created so that God might become incarnated'.⁵⁶ This position implies a fundamental correction in the common understanding of God's incarnation. If the incarnation is understood as reaffirming the goodness of creation, descent must be seen 'not [as] some kind of unfortunate necessity occasioned by human sin and suffering' but almost as a logical development.⁵⁷ Creation, in this view, would be 'theophanic and revelatory', and Christ's coming would have the objective of confirming 'the theophanic nature of creation, and [intensifying it] by means of a new light'.⁵⁸

Along somewhat similar lines, Jurgen Moltmann suggests that God's indwelling is not only a function of salvation or judgement but

⁵³ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 651.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 665.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 665.

⁵⁶ Simon Oliver, 'Analogy, Creation and Descent in Cusa and Aquinas,' in *Participation et vision de Dieu chez Nicolas de Cues*, edited by Isabelle Moulin (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2017), 125–142, 141.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 139.

the consequence, among other things, of God's delight in creation.³⁹ God's delight is shown most clearly in the refrain of Genesis 1: 'and God saw that it was good.' 'In this remarkable and recurring phrase', explains Terence Fretheim, 'God responds to the work, making evaluations of it. (...) This evaluative move (as with naming and blessing) means that God remains involved with the creation once it has been brought into being. God sees the creature, experiences what has been created, and is affected by what is seen.'⁴⁰ Moltmann shares this perspective, noting that 'creating the world is something different from causing it'.⁴¹ *Causing* the world implies a number of one-sided initiatives: making, preserving, maintaining, and perfecting, for example. *Creating*, on the other hand, implies a degree of mutuality better expressed in verbs like indwelling, sympathising, participating, accompanying, enduring, delighting, and glorifying.⁴² Such verbs challenge the division between immanence and transcendence and open up the possibility of a more fluid relationship between heaven and earth. Moltmann goes so far as to suggest that 'in the kingdom of Glory (...) the Creator's distance from those he has created will be ended through his own indwelling in his creation', immediately adding that 'the difference between Creator and creature will not disappear'.⁴³ The Sabbath, understood as a 'foretaste of the world to come',⁴⁴ would offer glimpses into this moment.

In the Sabbath, Moltmann notes, God, resting 'in face of his works (...) begins to "experience" the beings he has created (...), he "feels" the world; he allows himself to be affected'.⁴⁵ Eventually, he 'adopts the community of creation as his own milieu. In his rest he is close to the movement of them all'.⁴⁶ How can such closeness be explained? Should not God's infinity drive him away from his finite creation? Moltmann proposes to explain God's intimacy with creation on the Sabbath arguing that 'the sabbath of God's creation already contains in itself the

³⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 76 and 311.

⁴⁰ Terence E. Fretheim, 'The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,' in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 36.

⁴¹ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 14.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 276.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 279.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

redemptive mystery of God's indwelling in his creation.⁴⁷ The Sabbath, in other words, would anticipate the incarnation, as well as God's final indwelling, described in the Book of Revelation. How to understand the idea of anticipation is an open question. It would be possible to imagine, in highly speculative terms, that God makes use of the Sabbath, as if intrigued by the potentiality of matter, to think about new ways to conciliate transcendence and immanence. How far, God might wonder, is it possible to take the 'contraction of the infinite'?⁴⁸ The endless multiplication of beauty in the world might indicate that God never ceases to do theophanic experiments, looking to manifest himself in ever more clear ways – *respecting while expanding the limits of materiality*.⁴⁹ Such a perspective could help explain how water and stones were somehow transformed into flowers or butterflies throughout the evolutionary process. The movement towards lightness in evolution could be interpreted as indicating the ever-greater compatibility between matter and spirit in the created world.

Speculations apart, what seems clear is that the incarnation can and probably should be seen 'as a normative spiritual movement [rather] than as an isolated moment',⁵⁰ as defended by John Chryssavgis. In this perspective, based on the orthodox tradition, 'God at all time and in all things wills to work a divine incarnation. The Word assuming flesh two thousand years ago is only one – though arguably the last, the most unique, and most formative – in a series of incarnations or theophanies.'⁵¹ Chryssavgis adds that, in the orthodox tradition, 'the incarnation is considered as part of the original creative plan, and not simply as a response to the human fall. It is perceived not only as God's revelation to humanity but primarily as a revelation of the true nature of humanity and the world.'⁵² In this sense, notes the orthodox theologian, 'creation is a continuous process, where the energies of the incarnate divine Word are manifest throughout creation in time and space' with 'cosmological', therefore, 'not simply historical significance'.⁵³

⁴⁷ Ibid., 280.

⁴⁸ Oliver, 'Analogy,' 5.

⁴⁹ There might in such dynamism an aspect of play, a point explored by François Euvé in *Penser la création comme jeu* (Paris: Cerf, 2000).

⁵⁰ John Chryssavgis, *Creation as Sacrament: Reflections on Ecology and Spirituality* (New York: T&T Clark, 2019), 100.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 101.

If that is true, humankind is not alone in tilling and keeping. God, as well, remains involved in the creation, working to make of the entire world a proper dwelling place, capable not only of sustaining life in abundance but also of receiving God's glory. At this point, the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1–13) can again be instructive. The virgins are warned to remain prepared for the arrival of the bridegroom. If the bridegroom is the incarnated God, this parable can be said to symbolise the marriage between heaven and earth. The image of marriage helps explain how God and creation will live together: a difference will remain, but God and creation will grow closer and closer. The challenge of conciliating immanence and transcendence is likely to remain, but new solutions are also likely to be found, with theophanies revealing God in sensible forms in ever clearer ways. A garden-like universe, in this context, can be expected to gradually take shape with God and creation engaged together in the blissful task of exploring and bringing forward the infinite potentialities of a 'very good' world (Gn 1:31).

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